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Debra Blankenship
Portland State University

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At first encounter, Plato's dialogue, *The Cratylus*, appears to be a grand romp with words, a fast-paced, tongue-in-cheek exercise of Socrates' wit, deftness of intellect and clever rancor. A closer look, however, reveals a deadly serious, carefully-plotted battle by Socrates to establish his philosophical perspective as the only valid means by which truth may be investigated and defined. Ostensibly, the topic of the dialogue is the origin of language. However, it is the underlying exploration of language's usefulness in searching for true meaning, especially given its capacity to deceive its users, that drives the discussion forward.

The dialogue opens with an invitation being made to Socrates to join an argument-in-progress between two young men, Hermogenes and Cratylus. The reader becomes party to the debate at once, without preface, at exactly the same time Socrates does. This device creates, simultaneously, an immediacy and a timelessness of action reminiscent of the Homeric epics. Unlike most of his other dialogues, Plato does not provide details of time and place. Even the probable setting of a street corner in Athens can only be inferred. Plato's omission of an explicit narrative framework forces the reader to search between the lines. Plato further involves the reader by immediately

relegating Cratylus to a position of silent listener for at least three-quarters of the dialogue. This silence demands the reader assume the third-party perspective left open and become, in effect, an active witness to the discussion. In the same way, the implicitness of narrative detail functions structurally to involve the reader intimately with the ways in which language (the topic of the dialogue) creates meaning both by what it does and does not say.

For the majority of the dialogue, Socrates engages Hermogenes in a series of speculations on the etymologies of Greek words. Socrates' mood is frivolous and light-hearted. He delights at the speed and cleverness of his analyses saying: "I am run away with ... but I am not at my utmost speed," and "if I am not careful, before tomorrow's dawn I shall be wiser than I ought to be." Hermogenes cheers him on with praises of "clever" and "ingenious." This playfulness is reinforced by A.E. Taylor's suggestion, that, although adequate literary records are lacking, Socrates was very probably engaging in high satire of what were serious etymologies by others. In addition, Socrates takes every opportunity to direct openly sarcastic jabs at the "wisdom" of the sophists (Taylor, 83).

Against this frivolity, Plato juxtaposes, through allusions to Homeric poetry, a darker level of meaning. Socrates is not just adding his opinions to a street corner argument, but, on the order of the heroic Achilles, entering an ensuing battle on the basis of his aristocratic virtue and honor. Socrates utters lines spoken by Hector (*Iliad,* 6.265) as he prepares to face battle and inevitable death in defending his city of Troy. By this choice, Plato portrays Socrates as engaging in a similar epic battle, both in the dialogue itself and in general, by virtue of his political convictions. His destiny, like that of Hector, is the willing self-sacrifice of death for his Athens.

The theme of battle repeats at many levels in the dialogue. Conflicts between *nanos* (custom) and *phusis* (nature), aristocratic and emergent middle class thinking, philosophy

and rationalism, truth and deception all occur within the context. Plato's structuring of the dialogue as a dialectic interchange, essentially a battle of words and ideas, reiterates this symbolism.

Plato also uses Homeric allusion to underscore the deceptive aspect of language within the dialogue. While seeming to argue that the gods use only the correct words for things, Plato has Socrates draw apparently supportive examples out of the context of the goddess Hera's lying and plotting seduction of Zeus (*Iliad,* 14.291, 14.201, 14.302). The irony of the gods using their supposedly perfect language to engage in deception and lies apparently goes over the heads of Socrates' listeners. "You had better watch me and see that I do not play tricks on you," jests Socrates, a few lines later, when, in fact, he has just done so.

Battle and deception converge near the end of the dialogue when Cratylus, silent until this point, re-enters the discussion. What has appeared to be spontaneous improvisation by Socrates during his discourse with Hermogenes is revealed as careful strategy. Plato uses Homeric poetry (Iliad 1.343, 3.109) to illustrate Socrates' full awareness of his course of action. Socrates deliberately employs this awareness to develop a case that seems to coincide with the Sophist teachings adhered to by Cratylus. Once his clever ruse has seduced Cratylus into joining the "battle," Socrates switches the premise of his argument. Cratylus finds himself caught in a trap of words fashioned not by truth but by the seductive deception of hearing agreeable words and thereby supposing to have found true knowledge.

From this point forward in the dialogue, it becomes apparent that Socrates' cleverly ambiguous argument is a vivid, and for Cratylus at least, experiential metaphor demonstrating the kind of knowledge resulting from erroneous foundations. A quality of knowledge likened to the kind of gross errors that result from even the most subtle miscalculations at the

beginning of a mathematical computation. Plato uses this metaphor as a contrastive frame against which to describe the kind of knowledge possible when the foundation is an absolute and unchanging ultimate reality. Under such circumstances, the true use of words is identified as being that of tools, more or less useful, in the task of representing the nature of this truth.

In *The Cratylus,* Plato presents a compelling demonstration of how words can convincingly construct faultily derived knowledge. At the same time, he reveals the true battle underlying all others: the struggle to establish what foundation knowledge shall be built upon. It is a battle that touches human beings at every level, from the governance of cities to the governance of an individual's soul. Socrates' words near the end of the dialogue (436: d-c) provide an eloquent summary: "And this is the reason why every man should expend his chief thought and attention on the consideration of his first principles — are they or are they not rightly laid down? And when he has duly sifted them, all the rest will follow."

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